



Dark Side of Leadership: A Study on Organisational Climate and the Erosion of Sustainable People Value in the Indian Private Service Sector

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of toxic leadership and credit theft on organisational climate and culture in Indian private service sector organisations, employing a comparative analysis approach. By contrasting organisations with ethical leadership against those exhibiting toxic behaviours, the research highlights how credit stealing erodes sustainable people value, undermines trust, and weakens employee engagement. Secondary data from industry reports, case studies, and scholarly literature form the basis of analysis. Findings reveal that toxic leadership fosters disengagement and turnover, while ethical leadership strengthens resilience. The study proposes strategies for sustainable HR practices to mitigate the dark side of leadership.

Keywords: Toxic Leadership, Credit Stealing, Organisational Climate, Organisational Culture, Sustainable People Value

Introduction

Organisational climate is the collective perception of employees regarding the organisation's policies, practices, and procedures. Unlike culture, which is deeply embedded, climate is more surface-level and situational, reflecting the "mood" of the workplace. Leaders play a central role in shaping the climate. Toxic leadership — characterised by authoritarianism, favouritism, and lack of empathy — creates climates of fear, mistrust, and disengagement. When leaders or peers take undue recognition for others' work, employees perceive unfairness and exploitation. This perception directly alters the climate, leading to cynicism, withdrawal, and reduced collaboration. In industries like IT, banking, and hospitality, where performance is highly dependent on teamwork and service quality, a negative climate quickly translates into poor customer experiences and high attrition. Culture represents the enduring values, norms, and beliefs that guide behaviour within the organisation. It is the "personality" of the organisation, shaping how employees interpret and respond to leadership actions. Persistent toxic behaviours normalise unethical practices, embedding them into the culture. Over time, employees may accept favouritism, exploitation, and silence as "how things are done here." By undermining meritocracy, credit stealing erodes fairness and recognition systems. This shifts culture from one of innovation and collaboration to one of compliance and self-preservation. A toxic culture discourages whistleblowing, suppresses creativity, and damages the organisation's reputation as an employer of choice — particularly critical in India's competitive private service sector.

Sustainable value in people refers to the organisation's ability to engage, retain, and empower employees for long-term innovation, productivity and growth. A positive climate (trust, fairness, recognition) energises employees. A healthy culture (values of meritocracy, inclusivity, and respect) sustains engagement across generations of workers. Reduced motivation and loyalty. Increased attrition, especially among high performers. Decline in innovation due to fear of exploitation. Since human capital is the primary driver of competitive advantage, losing sustainable value in people directly undermines organisational resilience, customer satisfaction, and long-term profitability. Leadership has always been regarded as one of the most important factors in determining organisational success. Beyond setting strategic goals and managing resources, leaders play a central role in shaping the workplace environment. This environment is expressed through the organisational climate, which reflects employees' shared perceptions of policies, practices, and procedures, and the organisational culture, which represents the deeper values, beliefs, and norms that guide behaviour. Together, climate and culture form the social fabric of organisations, influencing how employees interpret their roles, interact with colleagues, and respond to challenges. When leaders act ethically and inclusively, they create climates of trust and cultures of fairness, which in turn foster collaboration, innovation, and employee engagement. These conditions are essential for building sustainable organisations that can adapt to change and remain competitive in dynamic markets.

However, the modern workplace has increasingly witnessed the rise of toxic leadership behaviours, which stand in sharp contrast to ethical and transformational leadership. Toxic leaders often engage in practices such as micromanagement, favouritism, intimidation, and credit stealing. These behaviours distort organisational norms, weaken morale, and create climates of fear and disengagement. Employees working under toxic leaders frequently feel undervalued, exploited, and silenced, which not only harms individual well-being but also undermines collective performance. Over time, toxic leadership erodes organisational culture by normalising unethical practices and discouraging meritocracy. Instead of fostering innovation and collaboration, it creates environments where compliance and silence dominate, stifling creativity and long-term growth. The consequences of toxic leadership extend far beyond individual employees. They ripple across the organisation, weakening trust, reducing collaboration, and damaging service quality. High turnover becomes a common outcome, as talented employees seek healthier workplaces where their contributions are recognised and respected. This attrition increases recruitment and training costs, disrupts continuity, and diminishes organisational resilience. In industries that rely heavily on human capital, such as the private service sector, these effects are particularly damaging. Service quality, customer satisfaction, and innovation are directly tied to employee engagement, making leadership behaviour a critical determinant of organisational sustainability.

The Indian private service sector—which includes IT services, banking, hospitality, and business process outsourcing (BPOs)—is especially vulnerable to these dynamics. Rapid globalisation has exposed Indian firms to global competition and client expectations, while intense domestic competition has heightened the pressure to deliver efficiency and innovation simultaneously. At the same time, high employee turnover has created a constant churn of talent, making leadership practices central to retention and organisational stability. In such contexts, toxic leadership can quickly erode trust and collaboration, leading to disengagement and reputational decline. Conversely, ethical leadership serves as a stabilising force, sustaining people's values and strengthening organisational resilience. Leaders who act with empathy, fairness, and accountability

not only protect organisational culture but also enhance employer branding, making organisations more attractive to skilled professionals in a competitive labour market.

In short, leadership in the Indian private service sector is not merely about directing operations or achieving short-term performance targets. It is about safeguarding the climate and culture that underpin sustainable value in people. Ethical and empathetic leaders foster environments where recognition, respect, and support are embedded into organisational systems, ensuring that employees remain engaged, innovative, and loyal. Toxic leadership, on the other hand, represents a strategic threat, undermining long-term competitiveness and organisational identity. This duality underscores the urgent need for organisations to invest in leadership development, ethical governance, and transparent recognition systems to protect their most critical resource—human capital—and to secure sustainable organisational growth in an increasingly globalised and competitive environment.

Toxic leadership has emerged as a critical challenge in modern organisational settings, with behaviours such as micromanagement, favouritism, intimidation, and exploitation undermining employee well-being and organisational performance. Among these, credit stealing is particularly damaging because it directly violates the principles of fairness and recognition that employees expect in their professional relationships. When leaders claim credit for the contributions of their subordinates, they disrupt the psychological contract—the implicit understanding of mutual respect, trust, and reciprocity between employer and employee. This breach erodes confidence in leadership, diminishes morale, and gradually leads to disengagement from work responsibilities. Employees who feel exploited or undervalued are less likely to invest discretionary effort, resulting in declining productivity, stagnation in innovation, and ultimately higher attrition rates as talented individuals seek more supportive environments. The consequences of credit stealing extend beyond individual dissatisfaction and disengagement; they ripple across the organisation, weakening the organisational climate and corroding the organisational culture. Climate, which reflects employees' shared perceptions of fairness, transparency, and support, becomes negative when recognition systems fail. Culture, which embodies deeper values and norms, shifts toward compliance, silence, and tolerance of unethical practices. Over time, these dynamics erode organisational resilience and damage employer branding, making it difficult to attract and retain skilled professionals.

This issue is particularly pressing in the Indian private service sector, which includes industries such as information technology services, banking, hospitality, and business process outsourcing (BPOs). These industries are heavily dependent on human capital as their primary driver of value creation. Unlike manufacturing sectors, where technology and machinery dominate, service industries rely almost entirely on the skills, creativity, and commitment of employees to deliver quality outcomes. In such contexts, the erosion of sustainable people value—defined as the ability of organisations to engage, retain, and empower employees for innovation and growth—poses a systemic threat. Organisations that fail to recognise and reward contributions risk losing their most capable individuals, thereby weakening competitiveness and long-term sustainability. Given these challenges, this study seeks to investigate how toxic leadership, and specifically the practice of credit stealing, influences organisational climate and culture in Indian private service sector organisations. It aims to explore how these behaviours undermine sustainable people value, highlighting the urgent need for leadership practices that are ethical, empathetic, and merit-based. By examining this issue, the study intends to provide insights into how organisations can safeguard

their most critical resource—human capital—and build resilience for long-term success in an increasingly globalised and competitive environment.

This study examines the prevalence of toxic leadership and credit stealing in Indian private service sector organisations, analyses the comparative impact of toxic vs. ethical leadership on organisational climate and culture, and proposes strategies for sustainable people value through ethical leadership and recognition frameworks. The study highlights the hidden costs of toxic leadership on employee morale and organisational sustainability. It provides insights for HR managers and policymakers in India's private service sector. It also contributes to leadership and organisational behaviour literature by focusing on credit stealing. The study focused on Indian private service sector organisations such as IT, banking, hospitality and BPOs. A comparative analysis between organisations with ethical leadership practices vs. those with toxic leadership behaviours is being made, which is based on secondary data on case studies, reports and scholarly articles.

Materials and Methods

This study is designed as a comparative analysis based on secondary data. Instead of collecting new surveys or interviews, the research draws upon existing sources such as academic literature, industry reports, HR consultancy studies, and organisational case studies. These materials provide a rich foundation for understanding how toxic leadership and credit stealing differ from ethical leadership practices in shaping organisational climate and culture, particularly within Indian private service sector organisations. The analysis relies heavily on thematic interpretation of qualitative data. This means that patterns and recurring ideas across different sources are carefully identified and grouped into themes such as trust, morale, recognition, innovation, and sustainable people value. To make the findings more accessible, comparative charts and models are used to represent the differences between toxic and ethical leadership outcomes visually. These visual tools highlight how toxic leadership leads to low morale, high turnover, and weak organisational culture, while ethical leadership fosters trust, innovation, and sustainable people values.

Berzosa & Ganguly's (2025) study on toxic leadership across industries reveals that manipulative and intimidating leaders create climates of fear, reducing productivity and innovation. They argue that toxic leadership is not just an individual flaw but a systemic issue that reshapes organisational culture. In service sector organisations, this manifests as disengagement and high attrition, threatening long-term sustainability. Zaghmout (2024) identifies destructive leadership behaviours such as micromanagement, favouritism, and credit stealing. These behaviours erode employee morale and trust, leading to a toxic organisational climate. The study emphasises preventive strategies, including transparent recognition systems and ethical leadership training, which are particularly relevant to India's private service sector. Gnanamkonda & Naidu (2023) highlight recurring patterns of dysfunction in organisations under toxic leadership. Their findings suggest that toxic leaders distort communication channels, suppress innovation, and foster cultures of conformity. This aligns with the Indian service sector, where hierarchical structures often amplify such behaviours.

Ghosh & Sinha (2024) focus on dark triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy), linking these personality dimensions to toxic leadership outcomes. In Indian private organisations, leaders with these traits often engage in credit stealing, undermining psychological safety and sustainable people value. Their work underscores the need for personality screening in

leadership selection. Kushwaha's (2023) empirical study demonstrated that toxic leadership increases stress, distrust, and reduces job satisfaction. Employees under such leaders reported higher burnout and turnover intentions. The findings highlight the urgent need for HR interventions to counteract toxic behaviours, especially in competitive service industries. Menon & Kavatekar's (2024) qualitative review of Indian workplaces found micromanagement and narcissism as dominant toxic traits. They argue that these behaviours erode organisational culture by normalising fear and compliance. The study calls for leadership development programs that emphasise empathy and ethical responsibility.

Joseph & Davide (2023) explore how toxic leadership undermines organisational culture, eroding values and long-term sustainability. Their findings show that organisations with toxic leaders struggle to retain talent and fail to build resilient cultures. This resonates with the Indian private service sector, where sustainability depends heavily on people's values. Elakkad's (2024) study on credit hogging in leadership shows how leaders who steal recognition damage trust and stifle innovation. The study found that employees in such environments disengage, leading to reduced organisational performance. This directly connects to the theme of credit stealing in your research. University of Toronto Study (2025) demonstrates that stealing credit for co-workers' ideas harms organisational knowledge sharing and collaboration. It found that employees become less willing to contribute, weakening the organisational climate. The findings highlight the hidden costs of credit stealing in knowledge-driven service sectors.

Pandey & Solanki (2025) propose Green HRM as a sustainable model to counter toxic leadership. By emphasising people-centric practices, recognition, and ethical frameworks, organisations can safeguard sustainable people value. Their work provides practical strategies for Indian private service organisations seeking resilience against toxic behaviours. Shrivastava & Sharma (2024) explore the consequences of toxic leadership on employee morale and workplace dynamics. Their study showed that manipulation and intimidation severely disrupt organisational functioning, leading to low productivity and disengagement. Kushwaha's (2023) empirical study conducted on toxic leadership in Indian organisations found that it increases stress, distrust, and job dissatisfaction, while also contributing to higher attrition. Ullah Khan, Siddique & Mughal's (2024) study on toxic leadership in Pakistan's higher education institutions shows that authoritarian and abusive leadership styles reduce employee resilience and innovative work behaviour. Berzosa & Ganguly's (2025) case study approach in UAE organisations revealed that toxic leadership behaviours such as manipulation and emotional instability diminish innovation, elevate turnover, and damage corporate reputation. Zaghmout's (2024) global review identifies destructive leadership behaviours and emphasises strategies to prevent toxic climates, including ethical training and transparent communication. Akinyele & Chen's (2025) study highlights toxic leadership as a multifaceted, destructive style, involving power quests, corruption, and psychopathy, with severe consequences for organisational culture and employee well-being. Elakkad (2024, Global) discusses credit hogging in leadership, showing how leaders who claim others' work erode trust and stifle innovation. University of Toronto (2025, Canada) found that stealing credit for co-workers' ideas harms knowledge sharing and collaboration, weakening organisational climate and reducing creativity.

Results and Discussions

Toxic leadership is characterised by behaviours such as manipulation, intimidation, micromanagement, and credit stealing. Ethical leadership, on the other hand, emphasises fairness,

transparency, accountability, and recognition of employee contributions. By placing these two styles side by side, the model highlights how leadership choices directly shape organisational climate, employee morale, and long-term sustainability. The analysis focuses on five key dimensions that are central to organisational health, such as: Employee Morale, Turnover and Retention, Trust and Psychological Safety, Innovation and Collaboration, and Sustainable People Value. The comparative analysis reveals that toxic leadership behaviours, particularly credit stealing, have a cascading effect on organisational culture. When employees feel their contributions are ignored or misappropriated, they disengage, leading to reduced morale, weakened trust, and higher turnover. This cycle erodes sustainable people value, making organisations vulnerable to instability. In contrast, ethical leadership creates a virtuous cycle. Recognition and fairness build trust, which in turn enhances psychological safety. Employees in such environments are more willing to innovate, collaborate, and remain committed to the organisation. Over time, this strengthens organisational culture and ensures sustainability.

The comparative model underscores that leadership is not just about achieving short-term results but about shaping the human experience of work. Toxic leadership may deliver immediate outcomes through fear or control, but it undermines long-term resilience. Ethical leadership, by valuing people and fostering trust, ensures that organisations thrive sustainably, as illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1- The Difference between Toxic and Ethical Leadership

Dimension	Toxic Leadership	Ethical Leadership
Employee Morale	Low morale, discouragement, disengagement	High morale, motivation, enthusiasm
Turnover & Retention	High turnover, employees leave	Low turnover, strong retention
Trust & Psychological Safety	Trust eroded, fear dominates	Trust built, safe to share ideas
Innovation & Collaboration	Creativity suppressed, teamwork weak	Innovation encouraged, collaboration strong
Sustainable People Value	Employees treated as expendable, weak culture	Employees valued as core strength, resilient culture

The study reveals that toxic leadership has a strong and harmful effect on the workplace. When leaders use fear, favouritism, or intimidation, employees begin to lose confidence in themselves and in the organisation. This results in low morale, where people feel discouraged and less willing to give their best. Over time, such environments push employees to leave, leading to high turnover rates. Toxic leadership also weakens the organisational culture, replacing values of trust and cooperation with silence, disengagement, and resistance. In human terms, it damages the spirit of the workplace and makes people feel unsafe. Among toxic behaviours, credit stealing is

especially destructive. When leaders take recognition for the work of their team members, employees feel invisible and undervalued. This not only reduces motivation but also harms psychological safety—the sense that it is safe to share ideas, take risks, and speak openly. Without recognition, employees may stop contributing new ideas, fearing they will not be acknowledged. This leads to frustration, disengagement, and a loss of creativity. In simple terms, credit stealing robs people of their dignity and discourages them from believing their efforts matter.

On the other hand, organisations that practice ethical leadership show very different results. Leaders who act with fairness, honesty, and empathy build trust between employees and management. This trust creates a safe environment where people feel confident to share ideas and collaborate. Ethical leadership also encourages innovation, as employees know their contributions will be respected and recognised. Most importantly, it supports sustainable people value—the idea that employees are not just resources but the heart of the organisation. When people feel valued, they stay engaged, loyal, and committed to long-term success. Organisational climate is the immediate atmosphere employees experience in their daily work. It is shaped by leadership behaviours, recognition systems, and interpersonal dynamics. In the Indian private service sector, where human capital is the primary driver of performance, a negative climate has profound consequences.

Low Morale and Job Satisfaction are Negative Climate Indicators. Toxic leadership and credit-stealing erode fairness and recognition, leaving employees feeling invisible and undervalued. The consequences are emotional exhaustion and disengagement. Decline in discretionary effort (employees stop “going the extra mile”). Reduced enthusiasm in customer-facing roles, directly impacting service delivery. In the sector context, in IT and BPO firms, low morale translates into poor client interactions and missed deadlines, damaging reputation. When employees perceive exploitation or a lack of growth opportunities, they begin seeking alternatives. As a result, higher attrition rates, especially among high performers. Escalating recruitment and training costs. Loss of institutional knowledge and continuity.

In banking and telecom, turnover disrupts customer relationships and weakens trust, as clients prefer continuity in service providers. Disengaged employees reduce effort, leading to errors, delays, and poor customer experiences. It results in a decline in customer satisfaction scores. Increased complaints and reputational damage. Lower productivity and profitability. In a sector context, for example, in hospitality, service quality is the core differentiator; a negative climate directly undermines brand loyalty and competitiveness. Employees hold implicit expectations of fairness, respect, and recognition. Toxic leadership and credit stealing violate these unwritten contracts. This leads to resentment and distrust toward leadership. Breakdown of loyalty and long-term commitment. Emergence of “silent quitting” — employees remain but disengage mentally. In IT services, breach of psychological contracts leads to reduced innovation, as employees stop contributing creative ideas for fear of exploitation. Organisational culture is the enduring system of values, norms, and beliefs that shapes how employees behave and interpret leadership actions. Unlike climate, which reflects short-term perceptions, culture is deeply embedded and evolves. Toxic leadership and credit stealing corrode this foundation, producing long-term damage to organizational identity and sustainability. Toxic leaders model behaviours such as favouritism, manipulation, and exploitation. Over time, these behaviours become accepted as “normal” within the organisation. This blurs the ethical boundaries, leading to tolerance of misconduct. Employees internalise unethical norms, perpetuating a cycle of toxicity. Innovation and integrity are stifled, as

employees prioritise survival over creativity. In Indian IT and BPO firms, normalisation of unethical practices can compromise data security and client trust, directly affecting global competitiveness.

Credit stealing denies recognition to genuine contributors, rewarding opportunism instead of performance. As a consequence, high performers lose motivation and disengage. Career progression becomes linked to politics rather than merit. Talent drain occurs as skilled employees leave for fairer environments. In banking and telecom, undermining meritocracy weakens competitiveness, as innovation and efficiency depend on rewarding genuine skill. Toxic leadership discourages dissent and punishes whistleblowing, creating a climate of fear. Employees comply with directives even when they are unethical or harmful. Silence becomes the norm, suppressing feedback and constructive criticism. Organisational learning stagnates, as employees avoid risk-taking. In hospitality, a culture of silence prevents staff from raising service concerns, leading to declining customer satisfaction and reputational damage. As toxic practices become embedded, the organisation's values shift away from integrity and fairness. Loss of distinct identity and weakening of the employer brand. Negative public perception, especially in service industries, where customer experience is directly tied to employee engagement. Difficulty attracting and retaining talent, as the organisation is seen as exploitative. In India's competitive private service sector, reputation is a critical differentiator; erosion of culture directly undermines sustainability and growth.

Credit stealing denies recognition to genuine contributors, rewarding opportunism instead of performance. High performers lose motivation and disengage. Career progression becomes linked to politics rather than merit. Talent drain occurs as skilled employees leave for fairer environments. In banking and telecom, undermining meritocracy weakens competitiveness, as innovation and efficiency depend on rewarding genuine skill. Transparent recognition systems ensure that employees receive due credit for their work. This prevents exploitation and reinforces fairness. Implement structured performance appraisal systems that highlight individual and team achievements. Use digital dashboards or newsletters to showcase contributions across departments. Encourage peer-to-peer recognition to complement formal systems. This will boost morale and motivation. Strengthens trust in leadership and organisational systems. Encourages collaboration, as employees know their contributions will be acknowledged. In Indian IT and BPO firms, where teamwork drives project success, fair recognition reduces attrition and enhances client satisfaction. In hospitality, visible recognition motivates frontline staff to deliver exceptional service.

Leadership development programs should emphasise values such as honesty, empathy, and accountability alongside technical skills. Introduce mandatory ethics and empathy modules in leadership training. Conduct 360-degree feedback evaluations to hold leaders accountable for their behaviour. Promote leaders who demonstrate fairness and inclusivity, not just performance outcomes. Leaders who act fairly inspire loyalty and psychological safety. Ethical leadership fosters a culture of meritocracy and inclusivity. Caring leaders reduce stress and burnout, improving long-term retention. In banking and telecom, ethical leadership ensures compliance, customer trust, and sustainable growth in highly regulated environments. In IT services, empathetic leaders foster innovation by encouraging risk-taking in safe environments. HR policies must explicitly prohibit toxic practices such as favouritism, exploitation, and credit stealing. Safe reporting channels and regular feedback loops are essential. Establish anonymous grievance redressal systems. Conduct regular climate surveys to detect early signs of toxicity. Enforce disciplinary measures consistently to deter harmful behaviour. Early detection and resolution of toxic behaviours. Reinforcement of

organisational justice and fairness. Increased employee confidence in HR systems and leadership accountability. In hospitality, strong HR rules protect frontline staff from exploitation, ensuring consistent service quality and customer satisfaction. In IT/BPO, robust HR safeguards reduce attrition and protect intellectual property.

Open communication channels, whistleblower protections, and participatory decision-making empower employees to voice concerns without fear. Create forums or town halls where employees can share feedback directly with leadership. Protect whistle blowers legally and culturally, ensuring they are not penalised. Involve employees in decision-making committees to foster ownership. Builds trust and psychological safety. Encourages innovation, as employees feel confident sharing new ideas. Prevents silent compliance, ensuring continuous organisational learning. In IT and service outsourcing, safe communication prevents project risks from being hidden, improving transparency and client trust. In banking, open dialogue ensures compliance and reduces reputational risks.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how toxic leadership and credit stealing affect organisational climate and culture in Indian private service sector organisations, and how these behaviours threaten sustainable people value. By using a comparative analysis of secondary data, the research highlighted clear differences between toxic and ethical leadership practices. The findings show that toxic leadership is closely linked to low morale, high turnover, and weak organisational culture, while credit stealing directly undermines employee motivation and psychological safety. In contrast, ethical leadership fosters trust, innovation, and sustainable people value, creating workplaces where employees feel respected and engaged. The thematic analysis revealed recurring patterns across literature and case studies: toxic leaders distort communication, suppress recognition, and weaken collaboration, whereas ethical leaders strengthen trust, encourage creativity, and build resilience. These insights emphasise that leadership behaviours are not just managerial choices but deeply human actions that shape how people experience their work. The study also acknowledges its limitations, particularly the reliance on secondary data and the absence of direct employee voices. Yet, even within these boundaries, the comparative approach provides valuable lessons for organisations. In simple terms, the conclusion is clear: toxic leadership erodes value, while ethical leadership builds it. The future of sustainable organisations depends on leaders who recognise that people are their greatest strength.

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